

Interview

1) Prof. Strenski, on June 15th, 2007, the University of Lausanne will award you with a Dr h.c. Have you been surprised by this offer and what does it mean for you, personally?

Scholars tend to work in the spirit of a vocation, much like the monks who gave rise to our European universities many centuries ago. As such, we tend to become absorbed by the great demands of our writing and teaching, and, therefore, on the whole, think little – if at all – about being ‘honored’ or perhaps even ‘recognized’ for what we do. Indeed, since such recognition comes so rarely, few of us would carry on if we depended upon external affirmations of our vocation. Yet, carry on, we do. I count myself in this number as surprised by this warm gesture of recognition from the University of Lausanne.

I do not mean to deflect the intention of your question, so let me be quick to affirm the wisdom of your countryman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who pointed out how much an individual human life is enriched by recognition. Thus, beyond how the recognition of my contributions to the study of religion affirms the value of the study of religion, I must say how deeply touched I am by this honor. The University’s recognition, in turn, motivates me to do more, and to do it even more vigorously. In particular, being honored in this way by a European university doubles my determination to continue my work on European issues concerning religion. In no small way, that my work should matter so much to a European audience confirms me in the present direction of my work, to wit on comparative notions of *laïcité*. This kind of study is needed at least in part because we assume both that *laïcité* means one thing everywhere and at all times, and that it carries primarily a negative meaning – *laïcité* just means a negation of whatever a religious position on the relation of religion and society or polity might be. Thus, we all know that Roman Catholic integral nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th century meant that French laws should be shaped in conformity with a certain version of Roman Catholic doctrine. By contrast, the *laïcité* of that epoch was in large part simply the negation or denial of the proposition of the Roman Catholic integrists. My question is whether negation is all there is to *laïcité*? Or, can *laïcité* be articulated to assert a certain set of positive values, in some way identifiable independently of opposition to particular religious ones? This study would include not only the obvious subject of *laïcité* in France, but also the closely conceived notion of the same name in Turkey. Two other comparative cases remain – India and the United States – to complete what I believe would be a meaningful comparative study of this important issue.

2) How can your discipline (in French, sciences des religions ou histoire des religions) help us to better understand our present society and present time?

I do not believe that 'religion' always and in every case necessarily has a privileged place of influence in human affairs – at least not if we understand the term 'religion' in conventional ways. That is to say, in terms of the recognized 'traditions' of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and so on. While we know that the 'traditions' may be influential, they also may not exert vital influence – again – always and in every case. It follows then that to the extent that the 'traditions' – in fact – do in particular human affairs, their role needs to be spelt out. This is what I take to be part of the commission of the study of religion insofar as it may "help us to better understand our present society and present time," as you say. Needless to say to a European audience, there is much work to do here given only the recent issues that have arisen over the place of the notorious 'affaire des foulards,' or about the questions of Islam in Europe, Turkish membership in the EU, the Christian identity of Europe, recently voiced by Pope Benedict XVI.

More than this, if we more deeply (from my point of view) conceive 'religion' as 'world view' or '*Weltanschauung*,' then I would argue that, empirically speaking, religion stands an even greater chance of making a difference in the present day. For if we consider religion as the 'traditions' plus so-called secular – laïc? – *Weltanschauungen* views as fascism, individualism, liberalism, marxism, nationalism, then the study of religion becomes ever so much more salient. The study of religion then should take its place alongside other sciences de l'homme in confronting issues thrown up by the modern world.

As such a science humaine, the study of religion brings our rich conceptual resources as well as our expertise in cross-cultural and historical comparative scholarship to bear on the present day. Within the limits of this short interview let me suggest how events in "our present society and present time" might be seen as involving longstanding and standard notions in the study of religion, such as the sacred and profane might apply to the violation of holy places in Iraq or to their creation at the site of former World Trade Center in New York City, how purity and impurity inform attitudes towards the perceived 'honor' of women in some Muslim societies, how the Protestant West flees from the idea of sacrifice while Al Qaeda embraces it, how the contrasting myths of the Crusades and Saladin bedevil relations between Western and Muslim societies nearly a millennium after the fact, and so on? Readers can supply their own examples from "our present society and present time" for other religious notions such as ritual, prophecy, holy war, divine justice and many, many more. Note finally that I have not even begun to explore the domains of morality, experience, social organization, material culture where the study

of religion has done so much excellent work.

3) Even if religion does not guide anymore our everyday life, it seems that politicians like Bush or even in France Sarkozy and Segolène Royal during their campaign allude to religion or to religious symbols in their gestures or in their speeches... What can be the connections between religion and politics today? Is it a dangerous relationship, or a fecund one...?

As my remarks already registered well indicate, I appreciate the issues arising in relation to religion and politics. Is the relationship 'dangerous'? Certainly. But equally well, I would argue that their relationship is inevitable as well. I say inevitable because I do not believe that a viable political or social order can flourish without some sort of grounding in fundamental agreements about what life together means. Traditional religion has long played this role, and pointedly in many sectors of the Muslim world, we are seeing attempts to grapple with and indeed to install Islamic underpinnings to modern social and political arrangements. Whether or not these will prove to be 'traditional' or innovations is, of course, open to question. But what is not open to question is their appeal to traditions of Islamic belief and practice.

In this sense, as well, the assumption of your question that "religion does not guide anymore our everyday life," confirms what some of us believe about the exceptional nature of Western Europe in hiding from itself the ways in which 'religion' does in fact 'guide' everyday life here. And, I do not even speak of the notoriously pious United States in questioning the assumptions built into your question. Would citizens of the largest democracy in the world – India – concur that "religion does not guide anymore our everyday life"?

Moreover, my gentle reproach to you would retain (and increase) its validity if one refers again to my remarks on laïcité as a 'Weltanschauung', ideology – that is to say as a kind of 'religion.' One might not like the use of the term 'religion' here, but we should not quibble about words. Suffice it to say that in asserting the primacy of laïcité, one is declaring allegiance to a set of foundational values, typically taken as 'sacred' to its adherents. Let me then submit that the presence of a vigorous Islam in Europe is playing the role of forcing otherwise irreligious or laïc Western Europeans to re-examine their own identities and, in the long run, to examine them as foundational, as sacred to the identity of the West. I, for one, welcome such a renewed appreciation of the positive content of what the Western achievement of our regime of laïcité represents.

Thus, the problem for me is not whether 'religion' guides our daily lives, so much as how to articulate the relation between 'religion' and everyday life. A preliminary answer to my question is that in order that two, perhaps competing, goals can be attained. First, the association of religion and politics is triggered by the felt need of citizens to claim spiritual grounding for their political arrangements. Yet, but the same token, second, it is exactly attempts to render that sense of spiritual grounding of political arrangements precise that sets into motion the opposite process of dissociation. Thus, in the United States, while pledging allegiance to the flag with the words 'under God' may not seriously trouble most people, if and when that 'God' is too precisely identified with the god of one particular religious tradition, one may expect resistance to the pledge. Put otherwise, when religious forces overreach in the realm of politics, they endanger the very appreciation of religious and spiritual factors in political life which motivated their first entry into politics.

4) What is your major contribution to your science, on what do you want to emphasize in your work?

I am perhaps the poorest authority available to answer this question. So much that we call 'importance' in the human sciences depends on the interests and needs of my readers. Indeed, part of the attraction of meeting members of the academic community here in Lausanne is to find out for myself how I have been read, how my work has been of benefit and so on! I am here, in part, to pursue my own education!

Having said this, let me mention some points that I, at least, consider achievements of which I am proud. Before my first book, Four Theories of Myth in 20th Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, attempts to anchor theoretical thinking in concrete historical and social contexts were at best amateurish and impressionistic. I think this first work set a standard for rigor for anyone seeking to locate thinking in the many concrete historical contexts of those who gave us our theories of religion. I have shown how text and context could be interpreted into one another – how the study of one might illuminate understanding of the other. In the case of classic texts in the science of the study of religion, I have shown how we can come to a better understanding of theoretically conditioned work by a dogged and richly detailed reading 'between the lines' of a theory. This involves both reading a text within its external and internal contexts – within both the larger social (and thus often religious) contexts as well as reading it in terms of the internal exigencies of an author's intentions and their institutionalized academic setting. I have continued this rigorous approach throughout my major publications, lately homing in on the situation of the Durkheimian school within the history of modern France. There, I sought to understand the Durkheimian preoccupation with the concept

and practice of sacrifice by trying to identify a particularly French discourse about sacrifice – both ritual and civil. I argued not only that the Durkheimians were in conversation with their contemporaries in the social sciences, but also with the entirety of modern French history as a nation. Thus, they had to contend with political ideologies of sacrifice (Dreyfus, World War One, Vichy) articulated by Roman Catholic thinkers, such as Joseph De Maistre or even earlier with Roman Catholic eucharistic theology dating from the reaction to the Protestant reformation. My commitment to engaging in this perhaps manically extensive exploration of ‘context’ provides the ‘rigor’ that perhaps sets my work above others who have attempted similar operations of locating a thinker within a context.

Interview for University of Lausanne Website

On the Occasion of Beign Awarded the honorary degree of Doctor Honoris Causa

15 June 2007